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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MUSTAFA

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SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ELECTIONS SITREP
#2: JANUARY 5, 2006: CEC DELIVERS RESIGNATION LETTER TO ABU
MAZEN

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The Central Elections Commission (CEC) January 4 delivered a letter to Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) requesting that the commission be "relieved of its duties" for the January 25 Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections. CEC Chief Electoral Officer Ammar Dweik January 5 reported that the letter was intended to convey the CEC's opposition to a January 4 PA cabinet decision that would enable PA security forces to vote in their respective duty stations, which the CEC charged would open the elections to potential fraud. End summary.

CEC Threatens Resignation

¶2. (C) The CEC January 4 delivered a letter to Abu Mazen requesting that the nine-member commission, including Chairman Hanna Nasir and Chief Electoral Officer Ammar Dweik, be "relieved of its duties." The request stemmed from the January 4 Palestinian cabinet decision that approved a PA Ministry of Interior (MOI) plan to allow Palestinian security personnel to vote where they are stationed, instead of the CEC plan requiring that security personnel cast ballots where they are registered to vote. The PA cabinet decision contravened an earlier presidential decree by Abu Mazen supporting the CEC's position.

¶3. (C) During a January 5 telecon with ConGen Poloff, Dweik said that the commission's future role in the PLC elections rested in Abu Mazen's hands. Dweik said that the CEC had previously agreed to the following conditions for early voting for the PA security forces, including:

-- Voting that would commence three days prior to the January 25 Election Day.

-- Voting that would occur in the district where security personnel are registered.

-- Voting in polling centers identified and managed by the CEC.

¶4. (C) Dweik said that PA Minister of Interior Nasser Yusif had advocated that security personnel vote in their installations rather than in polling stations operated by the CEC. On January 4, the cabinet, based on recommendations from PA Prime Minister Ahmad Quraya' (Abu Ala'a) and Yusif, voted in favor of the MOI plan, namely:

-- Early voting for security personnel to commence three days prior to the January 25 Election Day.

-- Allowing security personnel to vote "out of district."
For example, a security officer who is from Jenin, but is stationed in Hebron, would be allowed to vote in Hebron for elections in Jenin.

-- Voting would take place in duty stations/barracks, not in designated CEC polling centers.

15. (C) Dweik said that the cabinet decision to allow voting in stations/barracks was in violation of PA Election Law and would undermine the legitimacy of the elections since it opened the process up to accusations of fraud and mismanagement. Dweik questioned the motives of Abu Ala'a, adding that the CEC had briefed the Prime Minister several days earlier on the impracticalities of allowing security personnel to vote at their duty stations. (Note: If the cabinet decision stands, the CEC would have to provide both national and district ballots to every installation, rather than keeping the respective district ballots confined to the actual voting districts. End note.) Dweik said that the PM's motives to push through a cabinet vote had raised the CEC's suspicions that it was done intentionally. (Note: PLC candidate Salam Fayyad January 5 told the Consul General that Abu Ala'a is pushing this point to derail the elections, adding that Abu Ala'a and Nabil Sh'ath were very worried about Fatah's prospects in the PLC elections, including recent defections from Fatah to Fayyad's party. End note.)

CEC to Await Decision
From Abu Mazen

16. (C) Dweik said that the CEC would wait for a response from Abu Mazen to the commission's letter, adding that "he

(Abu Mazen) must either solve the problem or appoint a new commission to handle the elections." (Note: Fayyad also suggested to the Consul General that the resignation of the CEC members (if confirmed) would make it impossible, as a practical matter, to hold the elections as scheduled. While Abu Mazen could theoretically appoint a new team at the CEC, Fayyad said that it was hard to imagine finding acceptable replacements at this late stage, especially in the wake of reported death threats to CEC officials. Dweik had previously informed ConGen Pol FSN that he and CEC Chairman Hanna Nasir had received numerous death threats intended to encourage them to postpone the elections. End note.) Dweik indicated that the CEC would continue preparations for the elections in the interim, including the printing of ballots, voter education, and training its polling station staff.

Summary of Local
Press Coverage

17. (SBU) Palestinian dailies January 5 continued to report on campaigning in the run-up to the PLC elections. Al-Quds listed on its front-page the campaign activities of various factions, including Fatah, "Reform and Change" (Hamas), Mustafa Barghouthi's "Independent Palestine," Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa (PFLP), and Fayyad's "Third Way." The dailies also reported that al-Aqsa gunmen on January 4 took control of the CEC's offices in Rafah to protest the PA's arrest of one of its gunmen suspected in the kidnapping of three British nationals last week.

-- Al-Quds published a public opinion poll from al-Aqsa University in the Gaza Strip that 82 percent of respondents planned to vote in the elections.

-- Al-Ayyam reported that three candidates were competing for the lone PLC seat set aside for Christians in the Ramallah district. The three candidates, Wisam Rafidi (PFLP), Muheeb Awad (Fatah), and Zuhayr Khalaf (independent), shared similar electoral agendas that emphasized their support for Palestinian Christians.

Op-eds:

-- Commentator Yahia Rabah wrote in al-Hayat al-Jadida that the USG appeared to favor holding the Palestinian elections on time but charged that the White House had provided only "lip service" on the issue.

-- Bakr Misbah Taneera opined in al-Quds that Israel had fomented trouble and created obstacles to undermine the election process.

-- Al-Ayyam ran a commentary by Muhammad Yaghi that criticized those who had called for a postponement of the elections, stressing that a delay would further damage Palestinian interests.

WALLES